



## “MAMI”

### THE KNOCKDOWN CENTER

Organized by Dyani Douze and Ali Rosa-Salas, “MAMI,” an exhibition of work by five artists and one collective—all woman-identified artists of color—was an “offering” to the water deities known as Mami Wata. Often depicted as half-female, half-fish, Mami Wata were central to the precolonial matriarchal spiritual systems of West and Central Africa. Their image eventually spread to the Caribbean via the slave trade, and they are worshiped throughout the African diaspora today. Mami Wata are power incarnated: They reign over fertility, sexual desire, and material wealth, but are also capable of inciting flooding, drought, and impotence. They are harbingers of healing or destruction, and their power is reflected in the history of their diasporic circulation.

This premise prompts an unexpected question: Is goddess feminism making a comeback? Matriarchy, fertility, and the (quasi-utopian) promise of a peaceful prehistory appealed to many feminists in the 1970s. But like many of the truly radical strategies of the second wave, goddess feminism had unfortunate limitations. The universalized archetype spoke to a predominantly white worldview in which specific histories were elided and racial difference erased. Mami Wata, by contrast, are flexibly gendered, pointedly racialized, and inextricably linked to histories of domination. The work in “MAMI” dealt with a set of concerns, methods, and media as multifarious as Mami Wata themselves. (The show’s programming—which included double Dutch, DJ sets, line dancing, healing workshops, and a marketplace—was similarly ambitious.)

Some of the most striking works on view explored the palliative and transformative possibilities of technology. Doreen Garner’s installation *Untitled Dissection*, 2016, featured a graphic video of scalpels cutting

through flesh, spliced with endoscopic footage, displayed alongside assemblages of hair weave, condoms, jewels, zip ties, crystals, and pearls overflowing from eerily anthropomorphic forms. The technology at play here was that of corporeal control, but Garner's sculptures resist: Objects of desire, consumerism, and black culture overpower their containers, testifying to the oppositional power of the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life.



A video by Salome Asega featured the artist in a glittering, full-body spandex suit wrapped in tubes of bubbling water. The work is part of “Iyapo Repository,” 2015–, a series produced with artist Ayodamola Okunseinde. Together they imagine possible futures for people of African descent through fictional objects: in this case, a suit that simulates the feeling of being underwater. Designed to heal the trauma of the slave trade, the piece anticipates a future in which centuries-old wounds are still fresh. Other works in “MAMI” deployed water imagery to equally powerful effect: Aya Rodriguez Izumi’s *Offering*, 2016, comprises layers of metallic-blue tinsel, suspended from the ceiling in the form of a wave; and Nona Faustine’s photograph *She Came to Me One Day*, 2012, depicts the artist’s nude body at rest on large, jagged rocks at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean.

Johannesburg- and Tel Aviv-based MALAXA use “decolonial aesthetics” to explore the politics of digital representation. Their project *Exquisite.POC*, 2016—a stock image library of people of color, by people of color—took the form of a digital collage featuring search boxes with phrases such as BEDOUIN BABE WAITING FOR THE MOON #EID next to images of men and women in hijabs, pink wigs, dashikis, and hoop earrings. In her video *TFW Your Data*, 2016, Rodan Tekle layered the content of her YouTube, Twitter, SoundCloud, Snapchat, Dropbox, and Facebook accounts into a remixed self-portrait. Tekle stages her selfhood as a whirling eddy of data—a frenetic presence amid the internet’s oceanic expanse—but not without respite. Like Mami Wata’s power unleashed, moments of affirmation and serenity cut through the multimedia noise and were reminders of the radicality of stillness.

—Maya Harakawa